EQUAL EDUCATIONAL OPPORTUNITIES FOR THE NIGERIAN CHILD

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Abstract

Education is a process by which the society attempts to preserve and upgrade the accumulated knowledge, skills and attitude in its cultural setting to guarantee its safety, survival against the hostile elements and forces of nature (Nwagwu and Ezeocha, 2009). This paper title: Equal Educational Opportunities of the Nigerian Child, analyses who is a child? Who is the Nigerian child? It looked at the educational opportunities open to the Nigerian child. It also delved into childhood education and the traditional opportunities of the Nigerian child, the modern system of educational opportunities and the problems why equal educational opportunities is not realistic to the average and down trodden children. Some inequalities of the educational opportunities of the Nigerian child and the prospects were also discussed.

Education as we know is the process of teaching or passing on culture (way of life) of people to the youths. It is also the process by which the society attempts to preserve and upgrade the accumulated knowledge, skills and attitude in its cultural setting to guarantee its safety, survival against the hostile elements and forces of nature (Nwagwu and Ezeocha 2009). In fact, education embraces not only the deliberate process of school and colleges but also the indirect and incidental experience one counters as he passes through different phases or stages of life. Education starts from the cradle and ends in the grave.

Children Defined

The Webster’s dictionary defined a child as a boy or girl at any age between infancy and adolescence or a new born infant. The Black’s law dictionary on the other hand defined a child at common law as a person who has reached the age of 14 years.

The United National Convention defined a child as every human being below the age of eighteen years, under the law applicable to the child. (UN, 2001).

Going by the above definitions, it implies that a child in the face of the law is meek and innocent and needs the protection of the parents and the law in order to survive and grow properly into a full adult.

Nigerian Child Defined

The Nigeria Child in this context is somebody under the age of eighteen which either parents or only father are by birth Nigerians. In Nigeria, traditionally, and conventionally a child’s origin is traced to that of his father and not the mother. A Nigerian woman who marries a Ghanaian and bears a child, that child is not a Nigerian, but a Ghanaian.

Educational Opportunities

By way of definition, educational opportunities are the available chances created by the parents and government of any country for its children to be educated. Section 18 of the revised 2010 constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria on educational objectives held that:

1. government shall direct its policy towards ensuring that there are equal and adequate opportunities at all levels
2. government shall promote science and technology
3. government shall strive to eradicate illiteracy and to this end: government shall as at when practicable provide:
Free compulsory and universal basic education
5. Free secondary education
6. Free university education and
7. Free adult literacy programme (pp26-26)

Still on the education opportunities of the child, the UN convention (2001:34) recognized the right of the child to education and with a view to achieving this right progressively and on the basis of equal opportunity, they shall in particular
1. Make primary education compulsory and available free to all.
2. Encourage the development of different forms of secondary education, including general and vocational education, make them available and accessible to every child and take appropriate measure such as the introduction of free education and offering assistance in case of need.
3. Make higher education accessible to all on the basis of capacity by every appropriate means.
4. Make educational and vocational information and guidance available and accessible to all children.
5. Take measures to encourage, regulate attendance at schools and the reduction of drop-out rates.

A critical study of the aforementioned constitution and UN convention provisions on education: the educational opportunities in Nigeria states: “government shall direct its policy towards ensuring that there are equal and adequate educational opportunities at all levels. Here, government’s responsibility to providing equal and adequate educational opportunities to the Nigerian children is the focus. The same constitution and the

UN conventional cited earlier in this work provide that an equal educational opportunities of the child is the birthright of every child. This means that the children individual differences are supposed to be respected accepted and catered for. This is expected to be so irrespective of their individual idiosyncrasies-gifted, average, physically and mentally handicapped or having any observed learning disabilities. Unfortunately, the provisions are only on paper. The Nigerian child lacks equal and adequate educational opportunities in his fatherland.

Childhood Education in Nigeria
This is the education and training given to the Nigerian children from his pre-school to the primary school years. This period should specifically include the period 0-12 years. The “0” zero period is the period the child is in the womb to period he/she is born, while in the womb the mother with the cooperation of her close associates, educate her child before birth. That is to say, that education of the child begins at conception in the womb. This is supported by Abia (1996) when she states, “A child starts his education career in the womb”

Traditional Educational Opportunities
The average Nigerian child lives within his cultural environment and is educated to become a conforming member of this enduring, complex and highly organized village society. The child in turn is expected to perpetuate the culture by passing on the same tradition to his own offspring. Child psychologist agree that the first six years of life are vitally important to future progress and that during all the stages of child’s growth, he requires intelligent care of his physical needs, and train guidance in his mental, emotional and social potentialities. It was in absolute recognition of this assertion that Antoine Farrer, eminent French director of private schools for the European royalty said “give me the care of any child of good blood for the first seven years of its life and I will show you the child ten years latter a youth of refinement and personal elegance, and twenty years later a man or woman of admirable personal elegance, and thirty years later a man or woman of admirable culture and eminent success in life.”
The traditional education of the Nigerian child is informally done and purely a communal, cooperative and unlimited as to time and place. The joy expressed by the entire community at the birth of a child in Nigeria denotes full acceptance and importance of the infant. Men always praise the gods while women and children sing and dance in appreciation.

The duty of child rearing in African communities has been the responsibility of both the nuclear and extended families, with the greatest involvement by the mother, father and other family members to see the child grow to maturity.

Traditional education of any child, anywhere, at least in the Africa community, offers the child absolute freedom. While the child is left to learn and do by observing the adults and elder siblings, they are accorded absolute freedom under strict watchful eyes of the adults. They are full of imitating the adults. They play freely, build, cook food with sand, leaves etc.

As our children grow from the early to later childhood period, they are fully involved in doing some household chores like sweeping, washing, fetching water and firewood, work in farm with time, they specialize in areas like blacksmithing, trading, dyeing, hair plaiting, cotton spinning and weaving, herbal healing, wine tapping among others. What is to note about traditional education is that nobody is educated to be unemployed. Everybody contributes to the society and society takes care of everybody – the sick, the handicapped and the mentally retarded.

**The modern system Education Opportunities**

The federal government of Nigeria provides that it shall direct its policy towards ensuring that there are equal and adequate education opportunities at all levels. The key words here are: government ensuring equal and adequate education opportunity at all levels, ranging from pre-primary, primary, secondary and tertiary levels. The unresolved question here is has the government of Nigeria been able to ensure equal and adequate educational opportunities at all levels. The simple answer is no.

Over the last decade Nigeria’s exponential growth in population has put immense pressure on the country’s resources and on an already overstretched public service and infrastructure. With children 15 years of age accounting for about 45% of the country’s population, the burden on education and other sectors has become overwhelming.

Forty percent of Nigeria children aged 6-11 do not attend any primary school with the Northern region recording the lowest school attendance rate in the country particular for girls.

Despite a significant increase in net enrollment rates in recent years, it is estimated that about 4.7 million children of primary school age are still not in school. Increase enrollment rates have also created in ensuring quality education and satisfactory leaving achievement as resources are spread thinly across a growing number of students. It is not rear to see cases of 120 pupils per teacher or students sitting under tress outside the school building because of the lack of classrooms or children sitting on the floor for lack of furniture.

This situation is being addressed, current efforts of the Nigerian government with the implementation of the Basic Education Scheme (UBE). The compulsory free Universal Basic Education (UBE) Act was passed in to Law in 2004 and represented the government strategy to fight illiteracy and extend basic education opportunities to all children in the country.

However, the number of Schools facilities and teachers available for basic education remain inadequate for the eligible number of children and youths. This is more so in Urban areas where there are population pressure. Under this conditions, teaching and learning cannot be effective, hence, the outcome are usually below expectation.
Another challenge in achieving educational opportunities for Nigerian child is the issue of girl’s education in the North, particularly, the gender gap remains particularly wide and the proportion of girls to boys in school ranges from 1 girl to 2 boys to 1 to 3 in some states. Many children do not attend school because their labour is needed to either help at home or to bring additional income into the family. Many families cannot afford the associated costs of sending their children to school such as uniform and textbooks. For others, the distance to the nearest school is a major hindrance. Another cause of low enrollment especially in the North is cultural bias. Most parents do not send their children, especially girls to school and prefer to send them to Qur’anic school rather than formal schools.

Even when children enroll in schools many of them do not complete the primary cycle. According to current data 30% of pupil’s dropout of primary school and 54% transit to junior secondary schools. Reasons for this low completion rate include child labour, economic hardship and early marriage for girls. This is in confirmation of the UNESCO Shocking report indicating that one out of every four Nigerian children is out of school.

In the last few years especially since the launching of the Universal Basic Education act, much have been achieved in the reconstruction of dilapidated school building and construction of new ones, supply of desk and other needed furniture as well as the provision of toilet facilities in some primary schools which have given the pupils’ a sense of belonging and a conducive environment for learning. Orthographies in many Nigerian languages have helped the education system of the early childhood and primary education to be more innovative and creative.

Also, one year compulsory Early Childhood Education has been included in public primary schools for smooth transition into the primary schools.

However, the child friendly school concept which UNICEF is advocating for is not comprehensively adopted by the various states in Nigeria. A majority of primary schools especially in rural areas, lack water, electricity and toilet facilities for example there is only one toilet for 600 pupils in the primary school system. Despite political commitment to trying to reverse years of neglect in the education sector and a significant increase of the federal funding, investment in basic education is still low compared to other sub-Saharan countries. For these reasons, prospect of achieving educational opportunities for Nigerian children remain frail.

Inequalities in the educational opportunities of the Nigerian Child
1. The Average Nigerian Child.

Majority of the average children in Nigeria struggle for the non-available and adequate educational opportunities, some of them in recognition of quality education by their parents are sent to good private schools, while the left over fall back to substandard and ill-equipped private and public schools.

This child is born into an economically, educationally and social adjusted average home. The average home covers about 30 percent of the entire population of a third world country like Nigerian. Only ten percent and a whooping ninety percent of the populace are found in the privilege affluent and under-privilege rocket-bottom categories respectively.

2. The gifted and privilege Nigerian child: Profit this paper to say that most of the branded “Gifted children from the average and below average homes are not always fished out for encouragement. It is only those from privilege and affluent homes are always diverted and recommended for preferential treatment by the government. The implication here is that the affluent, privilege and the leading families continue to lead while downtrodden homes continue with their hand dapping roles. The privileged and gifted children keep on matching forward, even with low degree of
moral and morbid excitement, their ways are bought for them to climb to stardom. It is this class of children who fill states quota in unity schools across the country. Qualified and adequate personnel are employed to teach this special, ill-selected and highly revered group of the Nigeria children, while highly sophisticated instructional material and media are adequately provided in each of the schools for quality teaching-learning encounters in and outside classroom.

3. The under-privilege Nigeria Child
The Nigerian child who is born into poor homes, handicapped orphan and unwanted Nigerian children fall under the under privilege category. Children of this category find it extremely difficult to see light of their day. Life to them is a curse. Education in their eyes is a taboo. Efforts made both parents and government in provision of educational opportunities to this group of unfortunate and ill-fated children of this country are nothing to write home about. An attempt to put forth in these equal educational opportunities amongst the gifted, privileged, average and children of this under-privileged group are nothing but nullity. Child abuse is highest among the under-privilege group of children.

The Nigerian child’s educational opportunities: A Lovely into the future With the government implementation of the Basic Education School (UBE), the compulsory free Universal Basic Education (UBE) Act, was passed into laws in 2004 and represents the government strategy to fight illiteracy and extend basic education opportunities to all children in the country. Population explosion in enrollment of children due to the UBE Scheme has been identify as one of the factors causing the provision of adequate and equal educational opportunities for the Nigerian child impossible. Another factor stifling the provision of adequate and equal educational opportunities for the Nigerian child is the prevailing harsh economy. Except the economy improves the provision of equal education opportunities shall remain a mirage.

Conclusion
This paper made an attempt to analyze the educational opportunities available to the Nigerian child. Constitutional and unconventional provision for equal and adequate educational opportunities of the child be he an orphan, average, handicapped, privilege or under privilege, gifted or unwanted child have been examined.

Factors like parental ignorance, poor state of the economy, lack of proper implementation of government’s policies and above all poor management of the available resources have been educated as factors militarily the provision of adequate and equal educational opportunities for the Nigeria child. A more concerned effort to seeing education as a percussion to any human growth and development by the entire humanity advocated. It is only through this, that the future of the Nigerian child will be bright. It was in appreciation of this fact that Plato, long ago opined that “Only the educated are free”. A society that neglects it children, its most valuable and vulnerable resource also neglects it future. Also, the very spring and root of honesty and virtue is in good education according to Plutarch.

Recommendations
This paper proffers the following recommendations;
1. Government should train more teachers in Early Child Education to teach the pupils in the nursery arms of the public primary schools.
2. Government, Ministries of Education and State Universal Basic Education Board (SUBEB) should see to it teachers are evenly distributed, particularly to rural and riverine areas to avoid shortage staff in the rural areas and over population of teachers in the urban area.
3. More modern structures should be erected to accommodate the over population of pupils’ because of the UBE Scheme.
4. Tables, chairs and offices should be provided to avoid teachers hanging around and children sitting on the floor to learn and write.
5. Education should not be completely free; parents should be involved in providing school uniforms and exercise books for their wards instead of waiting for the government empty promises.

References


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